

NICK CARTER WEEKLY

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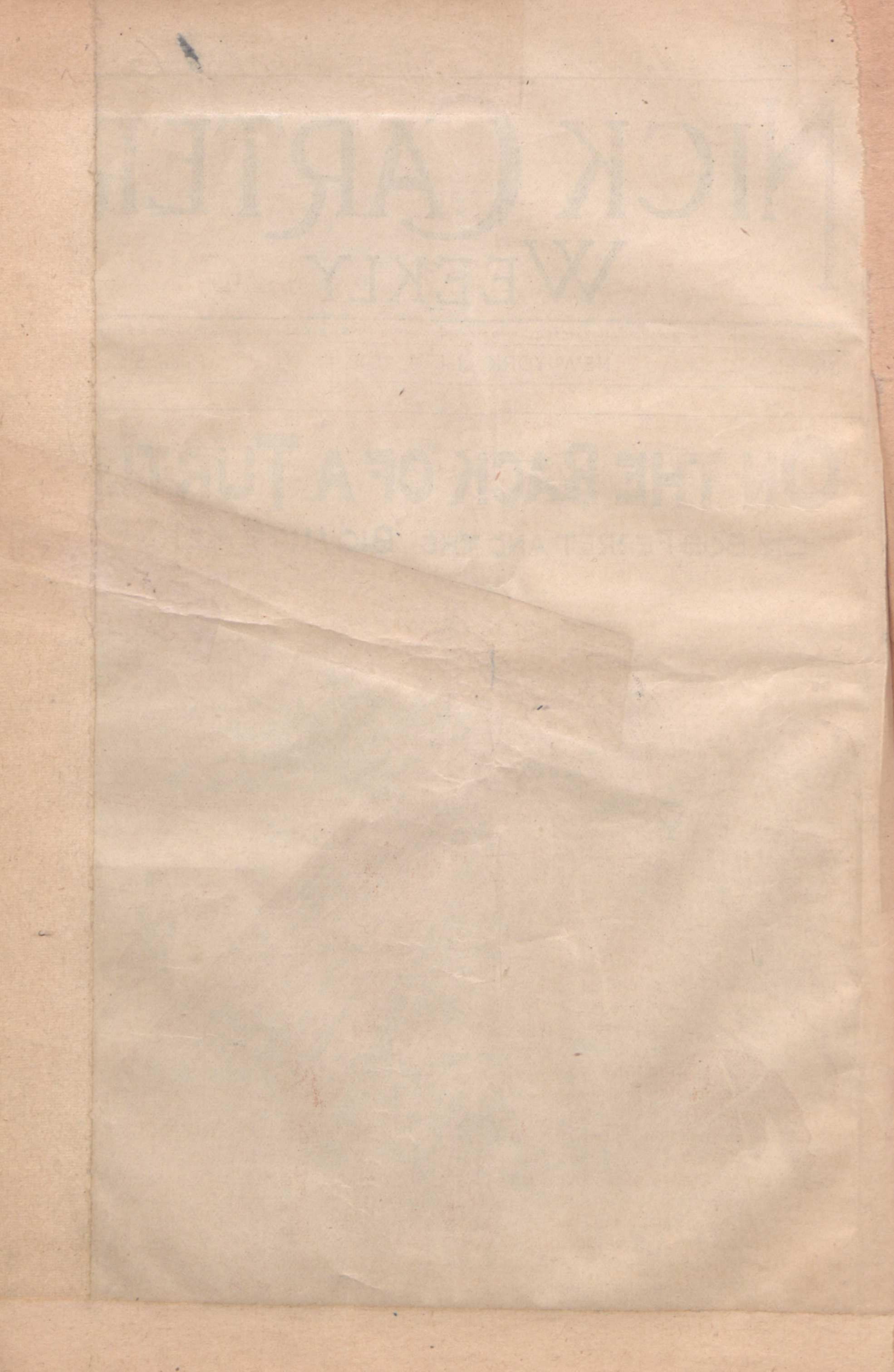
ON THE BACK OF A TURTLE

OR, BOB FERRET AND THE "BIG MITT MEN."



*By the Author of
"Nick Carter"*

THE AMAZING SIGHT OF A STRUGGLING HUMAN FORM, RAKED UP, CARRIED UP BY THE LOADER SLANT BOARD
GREETED THE LOOKERS STARTLINGLY.



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OR,

Bob Ferret and the "Big Mitt" Man.

By the Author of "NICK CARTER."

CHAPTER I.

MURDER MOST FOUL.

Whiz!

Biff!

Bang!

A lively scene was in progress in the gymnasium of the Riverdale Academy.

The place was a superb drill room for juvenile acrobatic dexterity and juvenile muscles.

It was made all the more superb just now because all-around school champion "Jackson," was showing what he could do with punching bag, horizontal bars and spring hammer.

As "Jackson" was really Jack Burton, crack athlete of Nick Carter's famous detective school, his feats were more splendid than wonderful to his two sole interested watchers.

These were his fellow professionals and school comrades; Bob Ferret and Buff Hutchinson.

The three inseparable novices of the great New York detective had entered the college in order to run down a crime centring there.

They had succeeded, but had lingered on the student rolls attracted by the life of jollity and variety.

New calls upon their professional

abilities had constantly developed, however.

After just completing a run for a bag of diamonds which some knaves had attempted to steal from an orphan heiress, still another case had come to the front.

It was on account of this "new case" that the three student detectives were now in the academy gymnasium.

Jack Burton was "practising" with a purpose!

That purpose made the scene impressive. Each member of the trio knew that an element of the tragic promised to lead muscular agility up to a most portentous climax within the scope of the next hour.

"If Jack makes the run—" began Bob.

"Which he will if anybody can," put in Buff.

"Taking more than seventeen minutes—"

"The murderer goes free."

"If under—"

"It hangs the man!"

"Keep tally, now!" ordered Jack, giving a pair of Indian clubs a final pinwheel swing and shifting his feet for a new exercise.

"What you want?" queried Bob.

"I want to go through the six total strength tests."

"Come on—first test: strength of back."

The college gymnasium was supplied with every possible scientific accessory.

Jack made a hard, steady lift with stiffened legs upon the spring dynamometer.

"Don't quite pull it to pieces!" rallied Buff.

"Strength of legs!" called out Bob.

Jack repeated the preceding lift, only this time with bent knees.

"Forearms!"

Nick Carter's athletic marvel held the dynamometer squarely with the dial turned inward, squeezing the spring as hard as possible.

"Strength and capacity of lungs!" proceeded Bob.

The way Jack made the steam-gauge pattern tester wriggle showed that he was simply untirable.

"Strength of upper arm and chest!"

"He beats the world on that!" gloated Buff.

There was something extraordinary in the way Jack took a position of rest on the parallel bars.

Supporting his weight with straight arms and letting the body down until the chin touched a tape suspended three inches above the level of the top of the bars, he raised the body until the arms were fully extended.

Jack "chinned" himself, with legs spread at full length as well, four times beyond the skill limit.

"Eight hundred points!" Bob averaged, as Jack came to his feet not a particle ruffled.

"That's a hundred above the university football requirement," spoke Buff admiringly.

"And two hundred beyond the class crew average," nodded Bob. "Jack, you're in trim!"

"Then come on!"

"Without resting?"

"I need no rest, only playful exercise that—and the telegram from Nick Carter says—"

"Urgency!"

"Correct."

The telegram alluded to had arrived early that morning.

It condensed in a nutshell startling information, explicit direction.

Three days previous all Riverdale—the academy included—had been shocked with the intelligence of a terrible murder.

An inoffensive old man named Albert Gordon had been found in a field near his lonely house shot through the heart.

The report of a firearm and his death-cry had been heard at exactly three o'clock in the afternoon by a farmer driving by.

It was not, however, until after the discovery of the body, many hours later, that the farmer recalled this fact as vitally important.

Naturally this crime attracted the professional zeal of the three young detectives temporarily at Riverdale academy.

Posing as merely interested, excited schoolboys, they had spent half the night endeavoring to find a clue to the assassin.

Not the remotest trace of his identity had been left behind by the murderer.

Nick Carter's three young novices were programming another day of investigation, when a pointer came unexpectedly that morning.

It was from Nick Carter himself.

It was in cypher, and this was what it said:

"In your vicinity, murder of Albert Gordon.

"Have inside information that is positive that Gray Mapleson, king of the big mitt men, was at the tavern at Deepledge, exactly three miles from the scene of crime, at 3:17 day of murder.

"Am certain that he had a motive for killing Gordon—the possession by the latter of some incriminating secret.

"Mapleson has run to hiding, but if we can prove one point, he must be hunted up and hanged.

"That point is as follows:

"Mapleson is a crack runner of acknowledged swiftness.

"Have a proficient sprinter cover the course he must have taken in getting from the scene of the murder to Deepledge Tavern.

"If you can find a person who can make this run inside of seventeen min-

utes, you land Gray Mapleson on the gallows."

"Famous Nick Carter!" Bob Ferret had greeted this stirring telegram by commenting—"he knows everything!"

And thereupon the veteran thief-catcher's favorite had "found a person" to test the seventeen minutes' run—

Jack Burton.

Giant-muscled Jack now led his companions from the academy.

"Don't let any of the students guess what we're up to," he cautioned.

They took a course that would throw any curious trailer off the track.

"What do you think, Jack?" prodded Buff.

"About the run?"

"Yes."

"I've made five miles in the given time."

"But on a straight course?"

"And a good road—exactly."

"While this—"

"Is decidedly rugged, I confess."

"Yes, it's through blackberry bushes, across fields, with fences to vault, wooded lanes to traverse, and all kinds of other natural obstacles."

"Still, Mr. Carter seems to think he has spotted the murderer—," began Jack.

"He is clear on that point," nodded Buff.

"That is why I think I will perform the feat."

"You can, if Gray Mapleson did."

"And then—," began Bob.

"To find the assassin, for he is in hiding now—to learn his motive, and thereby must hang a mystery. Fellows! this is like the old-time, out-and-out lurid New York city tragedies!" declared Jack with energy.

"The 'big mitt' men thrown in as a side dish!" murmured Buff. "I like to run across those slick confidence fellows. They've taken some big tricks through this district lately."

"We have a further personal interest in running this affair down," suggested Jack.

His face grew grim and serious as he spoke.

"You mean?" insinuated Bob.

"The murdered man's nephew is a fellow-student at the academy."

"Yes, and his uncle's sudden taking off has left his business in such vague shape that young Gordon will have to give up the idea of securing an education, unless we evolve some trace of the fortune Albert Gordon was supposed to have possessed."

"There is the house," announced Buff.

"And now to get down to business!" spoke Jack.

The scene of the recent murder was deserted, except for themselves.

The straightest course direct for Deepledge Tavern, three miles away, was nowhere near road or even path.

"Compare your watches," ordered Jack.

The timepieces carried by Bob and Buff were found to correspond exactly.

"Now, then, who will take the starter's end here?" questioned the prospective sprinter.

"Let Buff," directed Bob. "I'll put ahead and post myself as agreed."

"You can get in position near the tavern—"

"In forty minutes, at the farthest."

"Then at exactly two o'clock by Buff's watch, I start," said Jack.

"I'll time you from that," assented Bob.

"And if the minute hand don't hit the seventeen notch," voiced Buff, "it's the gallows for Mr. Gray Mapleson!"

"S-st!" warned Bob sharply.

He fancied he heard some one moving in the long grass beyond them.

Then, no further indications of eavesdropper or intruder materializing, he started from the spot.

Bob had a torturous, difficult task in reaching the road not two hundred feet from Deepledge Tavern.

A grove sheltered from direct sight of the tavern, and Jack's arrival would therefore not be conspicuously noticed.

"Jack will hardly make it," soliloquized Bob. "A fast walk and an occasional spurt took me over half-an-hour."

Bob sat down on a rock and took out his watch.

"Now!" he uttered.

It was just two o'clock.

Jack was starting—timed by Buff's

corresponding ticker—from the other end of the course.

2:05.

Bob watched the second hand, in fancy depicting his comrade's dash through the briars and stubble.

2:10.

"He's climbing the fence a mile back," pictured Bob—"whoop!"

Nick Carter's youngest and brightest pupil had seen quick Jack do some pretty smart things.

For all that, his eyes bolted now.

"Jack!" he hurrahed, with the immense enthusiasm of a genuine good fellow.

Three hundred yards away, spinning from one thicket to another, was Nick Carter's marvelous young athlete.

"Why! he's made it in fourteen—say fifteen minutes!" cried the surprised Bob Ferret.

Jack dove out of view with an undaunted wave of the hand, but due ten seconds later at the end of the brief wooded reach.

"He's made it, and it hangs Gray Mapleson, that's sure!" soliloquized Bob.

"What's that?"

It was a shout.

In Jack Burton's tones!

It was followed by a shot.

In Jack Burton's immediate vicinity!

CHAPTER II.

"RAKED IN!"

Bob Ferret gave a vivid start.

It was the motive power for a spring.

"Bedlam let loose!" he muttered—"that means something!"

Bob made a bee-line for the wooded stretch that interposed a curtain between himself and Jack.

The shout had been startling.

Under the present circumstances, uttered by Jack Burton, it certainly signified something out of the ordinary.

The shot immediately following had been alarming.

"It's stopped Jack! Snuffed out? a tragedy on a tragedy?" fluttered the young detective. "Now, then—Jack!"

Bob came at that moment within open view of a scene that flooded his mind with intelligence and speculation like a great searchlight.

He fixed one point instantly.

"We were seen, overheard, concerning the test run!" he soliloquized, with emphasis.

Bob settled on a second decision with vigor and excitement.

"Some one interested has tried to keep Jack from finishing the run!"

The "some one" was a man fifty feet across an open space.

He was in the act of "breaking" a revolver to set a new cartridge.

There was a second report.

Jack had wheeled, his face aglare with indignation—more, anger.

He fired with random haste but sure intent, for his bullet grazed the hand of the fellow beyond.

Bob saw a red furrow trace every knuckle tip.

Then a metallic spatter quivered to the chorus of a sharp, pinging tap.

The revolver, struck squarely, went whirling to the ground.

As if set in motion by the disarming catastrophe, its recent owner whirled, too, and darted into the shrubbery.

Bob ran right up on his companion.

"Jack—who?"

Jack's eyes were blazing.

"An assassin!" he flared, wrathfully.

"He fired at you?"

"Direct!"

"He was in ambush?"

"And the assassin?"

"How's that?"

"Who could it be but the man most interested in preventing the seventeen minutes' running test?"

"You don't mean Gray Mapleson?"

"I do mean Gray Mapleson!"

"He's given himself away, then."

"Dead. Get him!"

Bob Ferret started up magically.

Action had come to the front. It was of the kind always stimulating to the members of Nick Carter's detective school.

A definite point was hovering, beckoning, the capture of a criminal.

So clear was his identity, so crystal-like and apparent his motives, that Bob felt that he was running across the finish rather than the start of a new great case.

"It's a simple proposition now," flung

back Jack as he forged to the lead in what had turned into a race.

"If it's Gray Mapleson——"

"Himself or some of his pals—that I'll swear to!"

"What is he doing here?"

"What was he doing here on the day of the muruder?"

"That's so!"

"After something."

Which he didn't get?"

"Which he has now probably come back to get," declared Jack.

"He heard us talking——"

"Must have."

"Planted himself to knock out your record."

"He hasn't done it!"

"Not at all."

"I've demonstrated that I can make that run easily in ten minutes?"

"Sure thing!"

"He's good as hung—Nick Carter must have hinging points that settle him."

"When he's caught!"

"Which is easy!"

"I don't know that."

"Say!"

"He's burrowed!"

Bob and Jack had run many a nimble race thus together.

Not often had they faced the surprise, however, that greeted them where the open spread again.

Here was a swell, then a sweep, and a hay field.

A man was approaching with horses and hayrack wagon.

Attached to it was an automatic hay loader.

"Wait here!" directed Jack.

He jumped across the wisps of hay, rounding like curled waves, and hailed the driver of the vehicle.

"Seen a man——" he propounded, and described.

The fellow had not, and stupidly nodded so, keeping right on with his lazy loading.

"It's queer!" commented Jack, bounding back to Buff's side.

"He couldn't have crossed the field so soon."

"We were too close on his heels for that."

"If he hid in the timber——"

"Circle it—let's see."

The stretch was a limited one, mostly saplings.

It afforded no big hollow trunks in which a person could hide—the brush was low and sparse.

"Not there," reported Bob, as they came together at the juncture of their running ring.

"He took the field, then."

Jack surveyed it, more critically this time.

"Suppose our man's burrowed under some of that," suggested Bob.

"Suppose he isn't!"

"It's possible."

"Not thick or high enough."

"I don't know that."

Jack began to grow troubled.

"I don't like it!" he said.

"Why! we've scored an immense point in carrying out Nick Carter's instructions, anyway," cheered Bob.

"Doubly so, for the shooting enforces all suspicions."

"Well, then?"

"Only, Mr. Carter says the big mitt man has taken to hiding."

"What of it?"

"That means that he can't put that dextrous hand of his on him right away; that our accidental finding of him here is a big hit of luck."

"Yes, words count full weight with our patron."

"So, when Mr. Carter says that our test settles all points, we've a fresh hunt to make for this slippery Gray Mapleson. I wish we'd nabbed him."

"We must nab him!"

"The nearest covert is that stock-farm yonder, and he couldn't have got there without wings."

By this time the hay wagon was turned quite a distance across the field toward the place indicated.

Jack, sweeping his eyes over rack and loader, they suddenly became fixed on both.

"Hello!" he muttered.

"Hello!" he shouted.

Bob started and stared.

A terrific yell rang out.

It proceeded from the vicinity of the rattling farm vehicles.

Frightening the horses, these spurred up, rattling more than ever.

"That's queer——" began Bob.

"It's crooked—I see!" cried Jack.

"So do I!"

"Our man!"

A prompt supposition struck those harmonious minds simultaneously.

On a keen run the two young detectives put across the field.

That shrill cry, repeated in short, sharp, terrorfule accents, guided them, enlightened them.

The hay-loader was loading up and over into the rack something else besides cured grass!

The amazing sight of a struggling, distorted human form, raked up, carried up the loader slant-board, greeted the lookers startlingly.

"He was hiding in the loose hay on the ground——" began Bob.

"The rake tines have caught him!" put in Jack.

"Look!"

The black, struggling object was flattened, wrenched, dragged, driven upward more furiously than ever, as the team was urged faster by the frantic cries.

Up to the top of the slanting platform the scurrying form was run, head first.

Then, like a bag of grain shot over into a hopper, it went hurtling into the hay load.

"He must be half-killed!" commented Bob.

"Stop that wagon!" yelled Jack.

Wagon and horses were in the race now, however.

The fugitive had sunk from view after his sensational dive, as if into a snowbank.

The horses were going pretty fast—they went faster, as something suspicious, to Jack's way of thinking, occurred.

The hay loader suddenly broke loose, or was cut loose.

Lad-lightened, the horses covered ground at an augmented pace.

"He did that!" proclaimed Jack, sharply.

"The man we're after?"

"Didn't he?"

"Yes, he did!"

Bob was convinced, as the hay-loader wobbled flat.

At the back of the receding rack a plunging figure was now revealed.

It was the fugitive, and he dropped to a hanging position, looking back, and poised as if ready for a jump.

He was beribboned, his hat was gone, his hair looked like a scrubbing brush.

That tussle with the loader must have been a fearful one, but he seemed by no means beaten yet.

Suddenly he jumped to the ground.

This he did because the driver had got control of his startled horses, which began to slow up.

With the start he had, the fugitive was now moderately certain of reaching the fence beyond first.

"Wing him!" ordered Jack briefly, as the fellow's speedy sprint showed that his limbs at least were not disabled.

"Too cute for us!" answered Bob.

The runner was. He kept the side or the rear of the hay load between himself and his pursuers.

Then, as the latter gained the wagon, the fence was a barrier, for he had put past it through an open board gate.

A minute later Bob and Jack dove together through the same aperture.

"Where?" propounded the former.

The likeliest place suggested itself to both at once.

The front of an enormous stock shed, streaked and dripping apparently with calsonine or paint just applied, showed roominess and crannies within and beyond.

Jack slipped and Bob nearly tumbled as they crossed the wet, whitened space in front.

Bob's eyes, however, snapped as he noticed preceding footmarks.

"He came this way!" he declared.

"That door?"

"It slides."

The twain made for the door in question.

"Pump!" gasped a voice beyond it.

"Hello!" muttered Jack.

"That's his voice?"

"If I know anything about voices!"

Flop went a wicket window shield.

"Pump—I'll pay you well!" was repeated in urgent tones.

The fugitive was breathlessly direct-

ing, bribing, some one with him beyond the barrier.

"Get back!" shouted Bob, suddenly.

"Put ahead!" grimly directed Jack.

But both halted.

A novelty in criminal warfare greeted them.

Gray Mapleson—if the fugitive was indeed, as they supposed, the king of the big mitt men—had opened fire on them with a decidedly unique weapon.

Flip!

Splash!

Splatter!

In dismay the two young detectives recoiled.

CHAPTER III.

THE GOLD "BRICK."

Jack Burton was dashed back as by a flaming sword.

A power more potent than the strongest arm he had yet met proved an irresistible menace.

"Take care!" he warned, sharply.

Bob Ferret whirled like a teetotum.

He heard, saw, knew what was coming.

The immense stock sheds were being disinfected.

The process was being done in a wholesale way.

A mixture of chemicals and kalsomine in some great vat was being played with a hose instead of applied with a brush.

This system Bob had seen in vogue in many great rough city buildings—he knew his danger, and backed to it.

"Keep your eyes shaded, whatever you do!" he ordered.

They could hear the hand-pump work that forced the mixture through the hose.

The fugitive had evidently bribed its manipulator to assist in covering his escape.

A splatter sent Jack's hand up to his eyes.

Bob, more careful and spry, began edging sideways like a nimble dancer.

"Out of range!" he reckoned, and got around to the side of the shed.

Its boards here were long, warped, held only on two widely separated beams.

Bob selected the one he fancied must be directly in range with the man aiming to hold them at bay.

He took a glance at Jack beyond him.

Turning like a blinded Samson, Jack was trying to get his eyes clear.

Bob gave himself a springing leap.

Then he came against the broad cracked board like a boy jumping on a kindling stick to break it.

It gave like a willow splint—he bolted forward amid a crack like a pistol shot and a shower of broken splinters.

His quick eyes took in everything of a shed interior as he slid across a wet, slippery floor.

The hose was spurting, but, its nozzle fixed between two nails in the wicket, no one was directing it now.

"You rascal!" shouted Bob to a man pumping away in one corner of the side of a cistern vat full of the mixture.

"Told to."

"By a stranger!"

"Paid to."

"By a crook!"

"I'm no moralist!"

"Where is he?"

"How much will you give?" grinned the fellow.

"Quick!"

Bob flung him a silver dollar.

"That much worth?—he gave me an X!" jeered the man.

"I'll give you a licking if you delay me!" declared Bob, sharply.

He made a menacing dart at the hirerling.

The latter evaded a cuff by pointing to one of several doors at the end of the shed.

Bob put for it. His first glance, once outside, was instantly enchain'd by a sight of the very man he was after.

A ricketty pair of steps led up to the top of a second stock structure.

The fugitive was ascending these, and his leaps became springs as he saw Bob.

The roof was flat that he reached fifteen seconds ahead of Bob.

He sped down it, and Bob after him.

Then as he neared its end, a hopeless drop, a hopeless run, even if he landed safely, confronted.

Bob caught full sight of his face as he turned.

"Good as a photograph," he congratulated. "Never forget you. Hey—your grit, anyway!"

The man was, but desperation sheer and frenzied made him so.

He had turned his glance to the yard below and he followed the glance with a bold jump.

Two hostlers were holding a great, vicious-looking stallion.

They held each a strap twenty feet long secured to bitrings, and even at this safe distance kept their glance on the glaring-eyed, champing animal as if it was a tiger.

Coming toward them was a third hostler.

Bob had to look quick to take in everything, and fancied at first that this man was dragging another by the hair of the head over the ground.

Instead, however, he saw that the figure was a dummy.

A frightful double yell rang out as the fugitive came poising down for the saddle of the stallion.

He landed in it with a scream of mortal agony.

"The spiked saddle!" roared one of the hostlers, and let go his strap.

Bob Ferret felt his flesh creep, his nerves jar.

Quick-thinking, he traced out the situation.

The saddle was spiked to fasten in the dummy.

No mortal man until now had probably ever dared to mount the horse.

This one had done so by accident, encountering an agony that must have been frightful.

The man lugging the dummy stared, dropped his load, and ran.

The other hostlers, abandoning the holding straps, darted for shed cover.

The stallion arose on its hind feet with a neigh that had something unnaturally ferocious and rageful in it.

The fugitive—stuck.

The natural color of his face was nearly as white as the splotches that traced it, but he clung.

He uttered just once that awful cry of pain.

Then his teeth shut in mute agony, and he grasped the bridle with both hands.

Bob saw that in a flash the horse would make a bolt.

No obstacle could stop it—once headed

on a direct course, it would fly like the wind.

He gave a spring—timing, calculating, hazarding.

He was whipped about with a frightful jerk as he flung out both hands to stay a drop under the battering hoofs of the horse.

One hand grazed and clutched the arm of the frenzied rider.

The other struck a clamp like a vise about one ear of the frantic steed.

Lashed about, whipped up and down Bob grasped and flapped.

"Come down!" he panted, pulling determinedly at the rider.

The fugitive's face was the playground of terrible suffering.

Still, the gritty persistency of a reckless desperado flashed in his ferocious eyes.

He glared at Bob, he tried to shake him loose.

The horse spun around with a whirl like a top.

"Drop yourself!" hissed the man.

Into his breast went one quick hand.

Out it came, poising something that to Bob looked like a square of metal.

"Take it!" shouted the man.

So fiercely did he strike that the weapon slipped his grasp, although it landed with terrific force.

Bob went flat—the missile with him.

He felt as if a ton weight had cracked his skull.

Then, in a dizzying whirl, horse and rider seemed to flash clear to the horizon, beyond it.

He struggled up through all the manifold half-blinded, half-dazed stages of a person resisting a terrible shock.

"He's gone!" words struck his ear.

"Jack—pursue!"

"The horse is a flash."

"Some other—"

"None near in reach. He's got away."

"But in terrible shape! What did he strike me with?"

Bob Ferret got up at the reply.

It was sufficiently unexpected to prove stimulating—

"A gold brick."

CHAPTER IV.

THE VANISHING ADDRESS.

"A gold brick!" repeated Bob.

"One of the tools of the fellow's trade, yes."

"Carried around with him like a business card on such an occasion as this?" hinted Bob, incredulously.

"It looks so."

"Oh, no, Jack! Let me see it."

"There it is. What is it?"

Jack handed it over, turning to one of the hostlers he had evidently spoken to before.

"Hustle if you want to get in the trap with me!" the man said hurriedly.

"And see what we can do about fetching that stallion thief to terms?"

"What else?"

"Bob, get back to Buff," continued Jack to his associate.

"No room for me?"

"Scarcely."

"Shall we follow?"

"No, wait my report at the academy."

"All right."

Jack moved away with the hostler, and Bob forthwith started back for the course that had been run with such exciting results.

"Hold on!" hailed him.

Jack made a sudden return dive for his companion.

"I forgot to tell you," he said, hurriedly.

"What?"

"On the course to the tavern——"

"Yes?"

"Passed two fellows."

"What of it?"

"Got out of their range, although they started after. Just thought of it."

"Possibly two friends of this Gray Mapleson?"

"Very probably."

"Buff and I will find out."

"And we'll send 'a collective note' to Nick Carter on results, when we meet at the academy."

"Very good."

Bob had something to tell Jack in return, but he did not deem the moment an auspicious one.

"Mysteries are deepening!" he remarked, entirely to himself.

Bob spoke as he got outside the stock place.

He tapped the "gold brick" in his hand as he did so.

There was a significant expression to that tap, as if Bob considered that much of this alleged mysteriousness appended to its singular and startling appearance on the scene.

Bob knew what a "gold brick" was, from having seen the same before a good many times.

The police headquarters at New York city had such specimens numerously.

Nick Carter's own home cabinet of curiosities contained quite a variety of these mementoes of gullible farmers.

"The "gold brick" Bob well knew was one of the solid foundation stone implements of the proficient "big mitt" man.

Posing as a plunder-hampered burglar, a returned miner, a mint defaulter, his favorite trick was to rope in a victim on this wornout scheme whenever other sources of trickery failed.

Bob weighted this especial brick with a very leery eye.

He shook it, he rubbed some of the dirt and kalsomine off from it, and studied its surface keenly.

Then, quite thoughtful and preoccupied, he slipped it into a pocket and hurried across the field where its recent owner had been so sensationnally "raked in."

"Something to look up!" he told himself.

Bob reached the thicket where Jack had terminated his great test run of the early afternoon.

He had scarcely left it half-a-hundred yards on his way to Jack's starting point—the scene of the murder—when he saw Buff approaching.

"Got tired waiting," explained his comrade. "What of Jack?"

"He made it."

"Inside of seventeen minutes?"

"Over two to spare."

"Then it hangs——"

"S-st!" warned Bob.

"What's that for, now?"

"Don't mention names, Buff. I'm afraid our doing that carelessly back at

the starting place gave our game the hint."

"Our game?"

"Gray Mapleson."

"He isn't around!" exclaimed Buff, with a start.

"We have every reason to think he was—Jack is after him now."

"You don't say so!"

Bob recited a brief explanation.

When he alluded casually to the brick, he produced it.

"That thing fascinates me, Buff," he confessed.

Buff turned it curiously over and over in his hand.

"It's light, even for brass," he remarked.

"That's because it's hollow."

"Certain of that?"

"Listen!"

Bob shook it.

"Sure enough—it rattles."

"Which means it's got something inside."

"That's good calculating!"

"And that it opens."

"I don't see any lock or break."

"No, it's sealed, soldered."

"Going to open it?"

"When we get time, yes. Another point, Buff; look there."

"Something scratched in one corner?"

"Can you read it?"

"'A. G.'"

"Albert Gordon."

"The man who as murdered?"

"Exactly. Know what I think?"

"Tell it, Bob!"

"What brought Gray Mapleson hereabouts to-day, what possibly caused the Gordon murder, was that brick."

"And what's inside will give us a hint?"

"Of the motive? Maybe. Some one yonder!"

Bob pocketed his queer find hastily and bent his ear with a quickening flash of the eye.

A whistle too peculiar to be casual had struck his hearing.

"Heard that as I came over," said Buff.

"You did?"

"Half-a-dozen times."

"Then let us trace it."

"Why?"

"It may be one of the two fellows Jack ran across loafing in the woods. He dropped a hint that they might be pals of this fellow, Mapleson."

"You want to know if it's so."

Bob Ferret became the engrossed professional immediately.

The grinding whistle and Buff's explicit statements concerning the same combined to give Bob an instant idea of the direction to strike for.

"Wait!"

Bob spoke imperatively ten minutes later.

The whistle had sounded again, and he fancied they must be getting near the signaler.

He was sure of it as rounding a rise he distinctly heard a shout.

"Let me do a little reconnoitring," he directed.

Bob made his way cautiously up to a spot where he imagined he had seen a flitting form.

Crawling through some bushes and peering close to a deep, wide gully, he drew still and stiff as a statue.

A man stood not ten feet away, and he was craning his neck to look over the chasm and beyond.

He was not whistling now—he was shouting:

"Halloa—where are you?"

"Go slow!" droned a hail, and a second fellow came into view across the gully.

"Well!" he said disgustedly, observing the space that parted them.

"I've been signaling you half-an-hour!" testily declared the other.

"I've been trying to find out where I'm at double that time!"

Bob studied the speakers.

"If the cut of their jib don't bespeak the con man and three-card sharper, I'll give it up!" he soliloquized.

"See here——" began the man near to Bob, somewhat obstreperously.

"Don't bawl so! I've something to tell you."

"Come over, then."

"Got any spare wings?"

"Then we'll walk along till the sides meet."

"They won't meet."

"Till we find Mapleson, then."

"You won't find him."

"Eh?"

"Trouble."

"What's that?"

"What I said. You know how he came running from Gordon's, a spell back?"

"With the fairy story about Nick Carter being onto the case?"

"That's it."

"And some swell sprinter going to see if he could reach Deepledge in seventeen minutes?"

"It was no dream—the boy we spotted and let slip us was doing just that!"

"Whew!"

"Mapleson must have tried to head him off, farther on."

"Did he?"

"And got into all kinds of trouble. I saw a farmer raking hay, who says a fellow answering to his description got a fearful mauling in his loading machine, and was chased by two young fellows bound to get him."

"Did they get him?"

"Guess not, reckon not, but it shows the chase is on."

"Well?"

"We don't want to get spotted, so—make—city."

"Together?"

"Alone—waste—time."

The wind bore away the far voice, and Bob did not dare to creep any nearer or change his position.

"Alone!" he heard the man not six feet from him exclaim.

"Just cut—that's all, and hustle. Every man for himself."

"Did Mapleson get the brick?"

"Ah!" muttered Bob, and pressed the object in question with all kinds of fervent conjectures as to its importance.

"He did. Come quick, now!"

"Hold on! hold on!"

Some inaudible words crossed the chasm.

"Where? where?" spoke the fellow nearest.

The tormenting breeze was at fault again.

"Repeat the number!"

"Forty-two."

Bob heard that.

"And the street—wait! I've a terrible memory—forty-two, forty-two—"

The man began poking in his pockets.

He found a pencil, but it had no point.

He threw it aside, fumbled, and brought out a square of chalk—the memento of some billiard cue practice.

"Here's a stone," he spoke, stooping. "Number forty-two? All right. Got it, and the street? Got it. I'll report there soon as I reach the city. There it is! Now to copy on a card. Have I got a card?"

Bob craned his neck as the fellow across the gully disappeared.

The man remaining, after hastily scrawling the street and number his fellow had shouted over to him, had straightened up.

Fumbling for a card and another pencil to transfer the address, he obstructed Bob's range of view of the chalk chronicle.

"Capital! Things are thickening!" muttered the interested young detective. "The brick is the essence of the whole affair, as I guessed. And I've got it! But that address? I've got to have that, too, at all hazards!"

The man he was watching found a card.

But he could not find a second pencil.

He started to look for the one he had cast away.

As he stooped to regain it, he drew aside from the object on which he had scrawled the address.

The letters it bore were too far away for Bob to read.

The object that bore them, however, was not so far away but what Bob could make it out plainly.

For the life of him, as he did so, Nick Carter's young detective could not express a ringing yell.

Level-headed as he was, Bob Ferret was urged to make a bad break despite his sound sense and self-control.

For an amazing thing was happening.

The address on the "stone" was making off as fast as it could go!

CHAPTER V.

HIDE AND SEEK.

The address on the "stone" was making off, moving away, and Bob irrepressibly started forward to deter it.

The address was important to the fellow who had written it.

It was absolutely vital to Nick Carter's young detective!

Bob felt that he was not mistaken in estimating it to be a direction to some secret haunt of the big mitt men.

That meant the possible hiding place of the murderer of Albert Gordon.

"Hi!" shouted the man Bob had been watching.

He gave a start that bolted him squarely into the plunging Bob.

"Let go! let go!" vociferated Bob.

"Who you?"

"It's getting away!"

"Eh! What's getting away?"

The man was struggling suspiciously—Bob's ardent fervor was centred alone on the strangely moving address.

"What you wrote."

"What's that to you—prodigious!"

"Stop it!"

"The stone I wrote on!" marveled the gaping fellow.

"It's no stone."

"It's running."

"It's—a turtle!"

A turtle it was—big, dun-colored, flat-shelled, asleep in the sun, the man's glance had singled it out casually.

His careless hand had made a temporary memorandum pad of what looked no different than the rocky chunks about it.

"Forty-two!" he yelled. "But the street? Say! I'm absent-minded—"

"I'll help you."

"Get away!"

"It's creeping into that crevice!"

"You'll tip it over the edge!"

Bob made a desperate scramble, but the man got in his way.

Bob changed his tactics—he would abandon any effort for the possession of the turtle.

"Just a glimpse of the address!" counted Bob.

But he counted without his host.

The turtle was now traveling transversely, almost turned around from square view.

Even if the writing had been perfectly plain he could not have made it out, and that it was not.

"Forty-two what?" floundered the man. "There—got it!"

He gave the turtle a kick with his foot.

It turned on its back.

He reached to flop it between his feet and hold it.

"Ouch!"

"Look here—"

"Take it off!"

"Drop it, and it will let go."

"Murder-wow!"

The man was dancing a wild jig now.

The turtle had snapped its jaws over one thumb.

Swinging it, bawling, the pain-maddened victim made it cut the air like a club.

So vigorous were his frenzied manœuvres that he did more than he counted on.

It let go or was swung loose.

"You've done it?" cried Bob sharply.

"Which?"

"Where is it?"

"How do I know?"

Bob himself really wondered where.

The fling had been so sudden, that except that the turtle went up he had no knowledge of its fate.

"Interfering!" scolded the man, nursing his thumb and scowling.

Bob scanned the spot sharply.

Then he began climbing up the rounding rocks that backed the gully edge.

He poked among crevices, and he peered into clefts.

"Mighty interested, you!" flared up the man watching him.

He was getting suspicious, now he had time to think.

"I live around here," explained Bob.

"That don't make you perfect!"

"Who said it did?"

"What's the turtle to you?"

"What's a turtle to any boy?"

Bob kept investigating as he talked.

He was dreadfully anxious to have an unhampered opportunity of searching for the turtle.

He must get the address its hard shell bore—it might be the pivot of the whole case.

"Here's a hole," he muttered. "Do turtles favor holes in rocks, I wonder? Oh, the deuce!"

Bob spoke half the sentence in the outer air.

The balance was in a muffled, squeezed utterance, inaudible beyond some wedge-like orifice into which he had plunged.

Up to the waist he was caught, good and tight.

He squirmed and shouted for help.

Then he beat a tattoo on the rock with his shoe toes.

This must have attracted the attention of the man below, for almost immediately Bob felt him pull at his limbs.

He was that clumsy, however, that Bob came up an inch or two only to drop back tighter than ever.

Suddenly all efforts to rescue him ceased.

Suddenly, too, some intuitive sense told Bob that he had been abandoned to his fate.

He shouted for Buff now--the affair had gone so far that his appearance on the scene would not particularly complicate affairs.

Buff, however, by no possibility could hear him, Bob realized, and confined himself to kicking.

"I'll have to drop headlong," he decided--"against what? My head is getting dizzy, and—"

Bob felt a renewal of the tuggings at his feet.

Dexterity and sense were employed in a far different touch, however.

"It's Buff!" he inwardly rejoiced.

"For mercy's sake, what?" greeted his ears as he was pulled out into daylight.

"Thought it was you," panted Bob.

"What got you here?"

"I tumbled."

"The man who went away didn't put in here?"

"No—has he gone away?"

"On a tight run."

"When?"

"Five minutes ago."

"Queer!"

"He looked excited."

Bob could not exactly figure out this striking abandonment of the turtle by the fellow.

He began arranging his disordered attire.

Buff looked quite alarmed as Bob's hand came to a stop at his breast as if electrified.

His face turned white and worried.

"Got a heart spasm—it's from toppling head first——" began Buff.

"No!" gulped Bob.

"What, then?"

"That man!"

"Well?"

"He's got the gold brick!"

"Bob, it isn't so!"

"Look!"

The pocket sides were torn and loose.

"Sure you didn't drop it?"

"Never—that's why he left so quick, that's why he looked excited!"

"Hold on—where you going?"

"After him!" vociferated Bob.

"It's no use, but I'm with you."

"Buff! this is a fearful miss!" lamented Bob.

"He knew what it was?"

"Of course he knew it. The brick half-slipped out of my pocket—he recognized it at once. We've missed. I've bungled the whole affair!"

Three fellows met on the road leading back to Riverdale Academy just two hours later.

It was purely accidental, the coming together, and not at all consolatory.

Jack looked as if he didn't care about talking, as he faced the others.

"You needn't ask about Mapleson," he told Bob.

"He got away?"

"Could he help it? A fellow with the nerve and endurance of a Comanche, mounted on a hurricane of speed!"

"Well, we know one thing," spoke Buff, "the run from the spot of the murder to the place where Gray Mapleson was seen seventeen minutes later can be covered in fifteen!"

"We'll wire Nick Carter that," nodded Jack—still a little dispiritedly.

"It's all he wanted to know, isn't it?" queried Buff.

"Yes, but to have our man right in our clutches would have simplified everything."

"And the gold brick!" sighed Bob—

"ah! that was the fool miss of my career!"

"Have to mend it some way!" cheered Buff.

"By beginning all over again," insisted Bob—"that's the only way. That isn't the worst."

Jack and Buff looked curiously for the further record of complication.

"I had an address—an important address," pronounced Bob.

"Did it get away from you?" questioned Jack.

"Literally!"

"How?"

"It was on a turtle's back."

"What you giving me?"

"Straight goods. It was on a turtle's back—"

"Say!" broke in Buff, excitedly—"say that again!"

"I've said it twice already."

"Yes, but you mean—that is—not up where I found you sticking in the hole?" floundered Buff.

"Just where you found me sticking in the hole."

"A—a—turtle?"

"What's the matter with you!"

"Chalked on back—street, number?"

"Hey! You saw it?" challenged Bob, in a quick glow of hope.

"Ran right across my track as the man ran away, and I came up to you."

"Did you notice it?"

"Nick Carter has taught us to notice everything curious. A chalk-plastered turtle was."

"I should think!" murmured Jack.

"Oh, if you can remember!" fluttered Bob.

"Certainly. I've got it—made a note of that address. Thought it might fit in somewhere."

"Does it!"

"Want it bad?"

"It's the one saving clause in view!"

Bob's eyes danced and Jack Burton looked grimly satisfied as Buff Hutchinson took out a letter.

On its back was a scrawl—figures, words.

It was the runaway address.

"There you are!" he said.

"Buff!" cried Bob energetically, "you've saved the day!"

"What is it, anyway?" inquired Jack.

"The address to the secret haunt of Gray Mapleson, king of the big mitt men of New York city!" replied Bob Ferret.

CHAPTER VI.

THE ARMLESS FOE.

New York city, midnight—and Nick Carter's three expert novices at work, might and main.

The metropolis was going to sleep as Bob, Jack and Buff parted at a corner on upper Broadway.

"Fully posted, fellows?" queried the former.

Jack nodded, and Buff answered with a quick snap of his bright eyes.

"And fully equipped," proceeded Bob.

"With a proper leave of absence from Riverdale Academy," spoke Buff.

"And explicit instructions from Nick Carter," added Jack.

The mysterious Gordon murder case was now in coherent control with the young detectives.

They had hastened to New York city personally, soon as they were satisfied that it would be waste of time to hunt for Mapleson, his accomplices, or the lost gold brick in the vicinity of Riverdale.

Jack felt pretty glum over the fact that the big mitt man had escaped them.

Bob was rather sore over the lost brick.

Nick had treated both breaks as trifles, however.

"You have demonstrated what I want to know," he insisted. "The course from the scene of the Gordon murder to Deepledge Tavern can be covered in seventeen minutes."

"And that hangs Gray Mapleson," surmised Buff.

"When we find him," calculated Jack.

"That is the balance of your work—simple, plain and practical," said the expert veteran. "I have the thorough evidence that Mapleson was at Deepledge Tavern at 3:17 on the day of the murder—of visits to and quarrels with the victim."

"But the motive, Mr. Carter?" inquired Bob.

"Try and pick that up incidentally, Bob."

"If I hadn't lost the gold brick!"

"Try and pick that up, too."

"I'll do it or retire from the business!" cried Bob, nettled and mettled at the same time.

With plain plans and instructions, the trio started out that same evening.

There was no positive assurance that Gray Mapleson would go to the address one of his accomplices had written on the turtle's back.

It seemed a straight tip, a clear pointer, but skilled Nick Carter gave some good advice.

"Don't put too many eggs in one basket," he directed.

The scheme of search and surveillance was therefore divided up.

Buff was sent to find out all he could about an alleged lawyer, who Nick stated was hand in glove with the confidence agent, the respectable poser of the crowd.

His name was Aaron Trull, and his haunts and associates were to be watched closely by the ex-king of the New York newsboys.

Jack was to devote the next twenty-four hours toward learning what he could of sundry recent visits of the murdered man to New York city.

Bob was to watch, penetrate, if he deemed best, the place designated in the address Buff had copied from the back of the turtle.

When the trio parted at midnight on Broadway, it was with the agreement to report at Nick Carter's home at noon the following day.

Bob felt that he had the best lead of the three.

To the number forty-two place he was sure at least one of the associates of Gray Mapleson would repair, sooner or later.

That place, a four-story tenement building over near the river, the young detective watched an hour before he found himself in the midst of action hot and heavy.

It was a vast surprise and gratification, as he stood opposite the place watching its upper row of windows, to see a man turn the corner like a flash.

"It's the same fellow," voiced Bob.

It was the man he had met at the gully near Riverdale—the one who had robbed him of the gold brick.

Even if Bob's keen eyes had not penetrated the frail disguise of a turned up coat collar, an additional mark of identification would have convinced him as to the full identity.

"He's got the brick!"

Bob's fingers tingled, and Bob's hopes gave a great spurt as he noted the size and compactness of a parcel in the grasp of the visitor to number forty-two.

Then, before he could cross the street, the man had shot through the dark doorway.

Bob stood in the deep shadow of the one opposite divided between many impulses and suggestions.

He had not even analyzed them completely, when down the stairs again came the man who had gone up.

"I'll follow him," remarked Bob—"no!"

The man was important, his doings were part and parcel of the case in hand, but—

"He's taken the gold brick up there," formulated Bob. "He's left it there—for Mapleson. It was mine once—it's going to be mine again!"

Bob felt that so much hinged on the brick that he could divert neither mind nor intentions from its full consideration.

The only lighted rooms in the house were those on the top floor.

Bob had noticed a slight flap of one of its curtains as a door was apparently opened right after the recent visitor's arrival.

Bob was in the building, up the hall, at the door of the lighted room shortly.

He lay flat on the bare hall boards—he could see some one moving about, nothing more.

Bob tried the keyhole and got a vague view of the interior.

Its windows, four in number, were barred—a sinister den lay beyond that threshold.

And then Bob drew back with quite a flutter of surprise.

The man pacing the floor of the room was armless.

Close to the shoulder both arms were missing.

The discovery urged Bob up to a course of action quite at variance with his usual plans of procedure.

The man was alone—he felt sure of that.

He was the sole helpless guardian of what Bob so desired—was so determined to secure—the gold brick.

"It's my chance," he soliloquized—"my chance, if ever!" Bob softly touched the knob.

"Unlocked!" he whispered to himself.

One minute Bob reflected, one minute prepared.

Then he opened the door, crossed the threshold, shut it quickly behind him, and put his back to it.

"Who are you?"

The challenge came with the sharp, metallic vim of a quick-witted fellow.

Bob at a glance discerned that what the armless man lacked in form he made up for in vigilance and activity.

An ominous strength lurked in the suspiciously crouched shoulders.

The eyes betrayed unmistakable treachery and cruelty.

"I want you!" spoke Bob boldly. "Know what for?"

"I don't, but I shall!" came the hard, determined response.

"A man just came here——"

"What of it?"

"He brought a gold brick—we'll call it that."

"You seem posted!"

"I am—I want it!"

The tenant of the room showed no surprise—he asked no questions.

His shrewdness read the oracle, and he confessed it.

"I guess who you are," he said.

"Guess it!"

"I can tell it in two words."

"Tell it!"

"Nick Carter."

"Sure!"

"You see, I'm posted."

"It looks so."

"But you won't get that brick!"

"No?"

"You won't find the man who owns it here!"

"No?"

"And you won't get away from here alive!"

Bob had never quite struck such a mixture of defiance and assurance mingled with what seemed to be utter helplessness.

He took a quick glance about the room. It certainly held no other occupant.

Could the man be counting on the arrival of outside help?

Then he must act all the more quickly.

Bob advanced straight upon the fellow, and the latter retreated.

"I shall find the brick, for I came after it," spoke Bob, "I shall take it and you to the police station."

"Which will you do first?" sneered the cripple.

He had kept retreating.

It was with a purpose, it seemed.

Getting Bob away from the door, he suddenly dodged.

Past him he went—Bob almost feared he was meditating a bolt into the hall, armless as he was, in some deft way.

Instead, he shot his head down at the key.

Bob heard it turn, Bob heard it click in the man's teeth.

Bob, looking, saw that it was gone.

What the fellow had done with it—swallowed it, cast it into some drapery or his own clothes in one of those quick, nervous movements of his head—Bob could not for the life of him tell.

"That," pronounced the cripple, with a glare that made Bob serious, "settles you!"

"Does, eh?"

"Wait and see! Now then, you come here to bulldoze me!"

"I come for that brick, and I'm going to get it."

"You imagine because I have no arms you can do what you please!"

"I pity your helplessness, but I must do my duty."

"Pity!"

The scorn of the tones was indescribable.

The fellow kept walking about—nervously, rapidly.

"I suppose you are armed?" he went on—"all right! even then I call it a fair duel."

"Duel?" repeated Bob in some wonder.

"It's going to be that!"

"Indeed?"

"Did you ever hear of me before?"

"Never."

"Every man has his specialty."

"What are you getting at?"

"I'm a fighter."

"Without arms!"

"Never mind. I'm going to kill you!"

"Helpless?"

"Helpless!" shrilly howled the cripple, as if the word stung him.

He sprang at a corner of the room like a flash as he spoke.

"Helpless?" he screamed, deliriously. "See me!"

CHAPTER VII.

A HOT TIME.

Nick Carter's young detective knew that something peculiar and unusual was about to befall.

Crime has many monstrosities, and here, Bob felt sure, was a new one revealed.

The cripple showed real assurance back of his bold defiance—power supporting his apparent conceit.

He dove, slid and bounced about the apartment like a grotesque figure in a comedy.

Just as his teeth had caught and turned the key he now utilized his lips.

They swept the iron slab of a mantel, and there were sundry ominous clicks.

"Wonder what he's going to do?" mused Bob.

The young detective lost partial sight of business amid uncontrollable curiosity.

Flip—flop—flap.

The cripple had filled his mouth with missles just as if he was loading up a beanblower.

A glittering particle skipped the tip of Bob's nose.

It cut quite painfully.

Bob dodged a second, as he saw that it was a small, jagged square of glass.

"Hold on there!" he ordered, picking up and holding up a splint-bottomed chair as a shield.

"Ah, yes!"

"That your specialty?"

"One of them."

"I'll knock you down if you keep that up."

"Catch me!"

Certainly the fellow was elusive—Bob had rarely seen such agility.

He made a feint or two at knocking down the cripple with the chair, at grabbing him.

Bob, however, did not pursue him close—he feared being led into some kind of a trap.

"Where is the brick—that's what I came for," soliloquized Bob.

There was a dresser with one top drawer.

To this Bob glided.

It was locked, but he had it open with the assistance of his tool knife in a jiffy.

"Ho! ho!" jeered the cripple, and flip-flap! came a painful skip of two other glass particles across Bob's cheek.

The stinging contact nettled Bob.

He drew his revolver.

"We'll stop this right here!" he said sternly.

The armless man glared at pistol and adversary.

His keen eyes glowed calculatingly with a reckless mixture of cunningness and bravado.

"Whoop! Now for the duel!" he shouted.

He ran to a far corner of the room.

This he did backward, and as he went he kicked off one shoe, and then the other.

Bob ducked to miss a good, hard, double crack.

This remarkable cripple fired his foot-gear as deftly as might an expert a baseball.

"What is he up to, anyway?" muttered Bob, getting a trifle uneasy.

The young detective was becoming worried, for time was passing.

Pressing, as well, for friends of his unique opponent might arrive at any moment.

More than that, the gold brick was still a concealed element, and Bob could not imagine in what particular place in the roomy apartment it might be hidden.

With more curiosity than interest, Bob saw the cripple kick one foot and then the other foot into a new pair of shoes in his far corner.

He stamped to shove his feet past a stiff, elastic top, and they sounded heavy and metallic.

Lead-weighted shoes were no novelty to Bob—he had once had a terrific encounter with a circus fellow wearing the same.

That there were a different kind of

footgear, an ominous kind, a blood-chilling kind, Bob knew a second later.

"Action!" cried the cripple, making a swift forward rush.

Click—snap—once.

Click—snap—twice.

As he ran, the cripple tapped hard one heel and then the other on the floor.

Something slid along the sole of each shoe.

From either toe there protruded like the spike of a sword-fish a keen metallic point.

It resembled a bayonet—it was about six inches long, and three-sided, ran to a formidably heavy base.

"Well!" muttered Bob in wonderment.

"Have at you!"

"Keep back!"

Whether a drapery cord, a pole stretched across an archway, various picture hooks and nails, were as purposely set and as now regularly impressed into service, Bob could not tell.

Only this he knew, that the fellow, only foot-armed, but even so doubly sword-armed, began a series of evolutions—by catching with his teeth here, there, everywhere, for swinging support—positively marvelous and bewildering.

Leaping, spinning, flying, it seemed, he started in at his "duel."

A duel it was, and Bob repented his scorn-repulsed pity at the fellow's "helplessness."

So swift and distracting were the movements of the armless fellow that Bob had not even time to poise his pistol and fire.

"Let up!" he shouted, dodging a kick of one bayoneted foot, that, striking accurately, would have impaled him.

"Again!"

"I'll shoot!"

"Why don't you?"

Bob did.

Squarely but not intentionally the bullet pierced the kicker's breast.

He only guffawed.

"Breastplate!" he chuckled—"got you—got you! got you!"

The speaker certainly understood the art of hustling.

Bob was actually rattled at the hot, furious onslaught he now made.

Those steel-shod feet flew like Indian clubs.

Bob pressed to the door, tried to pull it open.

Whish!

He felt one of those bayonets slide his loins by a half-inch graze.

Plunk!

An awful force sent the other squarely aimed for Bob's limbs.

Had he not moved with lightning-like agility he would have been fixed to that door frame, pinned close.

Just in time he dove, and the movement brought a catastrophe to the kicker.

The foot bayonet, missing Bob, went clear through the door.

It penetrated a thick side piece, buried to the toe, and stuck.

The speaker tried to draw it out—impossible, it was affixed.

He tried as well to maintain a standing position—this, too, he found to be impossible.

He wavered and sank flat, rigidly driven by the setting of the imprisoned foot.

Bob sprang at him—on him.

"The duel's over!" he pronounced.

"Hah!" hissed the baffled cripple furiously. "My turn now."

"If I hadn't missed!"

"But you did. The brick!"

"Find it!"

"You guessed a bit back."

"Ugh!"

"I'll guess, now!"

The cripple squirmed, he rolled half over like a writhing eel.

Bob ran his hand across the fellow's chest.

"Your breastplate is what I guessed!" he gloated.

Bob felt the brick in the cripple's breast.

He was dragging it out, when a superior tug set his captive free.

The transfixing bayonet broke at the toe point of contact.

The two feet, one armed, one clear, now shot into action.

Bob jumped on them, pinned them with his weight, leaned forward to remove the brick.

He found himself sliding the next instant, the cripple with him.

"How's this?" he interrogated, quickly.

"Goose cooked!" clacked the cripple, jubilantly.

"The door!"

It was being pushed open.

Bob tore the brick, anyway, a handful of shirt front with it, from its possessor.

He sprang to his feet.

"The fellow has come back who was here," he reckoned.

Bob reckoned as well a dash ere he was seen, prevented, by the intruder.

The door was half open.

Bob reached forward to pull it clear so.

He aimed for the rush contemplated—he had the brick now.

Half started, he was prevented.

The nervy, dextrous, though prostrate cripple had reached out with his one speared foot.

He gripped a bunch behind Bob's knee.

As the door swept open the jerked suddenly.

Then he pulled, and Bob Ferret went flat to the floor with a slam.

CHAPTER VIII.

A STROKE OF LUCK.

Bob righted his revolver with one hand.

He used the other to get purchase for an upright spring.

He went flat again as he tried it.

The eel-like cripple had squirmed around and was on top of him.

"What now!" projected a new, excited voice.

"Work, now!" panted the cripple.

"Hey?"

"You see!"

"Hi—here, you! quick, nail him!"

"Nailed he is!" gloated the cripple.

Bob Ferret was.

They were three to one, counting the cripple, and he counted most, to Bob's way of thinking.

The armless acrobat rolled all over him, and materially aided in the scuffle that ended in Bob lying prostrate, bound hand and foot.

Bob recognized the two men who had entered the room.

One was the recent gold brick visitor, the other the man who had given him the address at the gully near Riverdale.

"Well!" exclaimed the latter, "here's a go!"

"No," corrected the cripple maliciously, "here's a—goner!"

"This boy—"

"He's no boy."

"Looks it."

"Looks are deceiving."

"What is he, then?"

"A detective."

"That don't change his being a boy?"

"Not when he's got the fate of a man staring him in the face."

"What do you mean?"

"Gag him, get him away from here, drown him, shoot him, poison him, but do it quick!"

The two men stared hard.

"Do I speak by the book?" demanded the cripple.

"Guess you do—Mapleson said you knew what."

"Then jig him on the scurry. He's one of Nick Carter's!"

"Ah!"

"A quick one, a hard one to beat. Get the gold brick. It's in his pocket—see!"

"He got that!"

"Nearly. Get rid of him and back here quick, or you'll find me gone."

"To Mapleson?"

"He needs me pretty badly, don't he?"

Bob lay helpless—downed—but Bob kept ears and eyes open and mind active.

In some way the fellow afflicted with absent-mindedness had found out No. 42.

It seemed that Mapleson had sent word to the cripple, and all hands were to go to him soon, bringing the brick.

Bob saw the man who had stolen it from him at the gully take possession of it again.

"Safer with me, it seems," he said to the cripple.

"So long as it gets to Mapleson O. K.!" airily announced the latter.

He strutted around like a proud turkey cock, with many an exultant look at Bob.

"Not so helpless, eh?" he jeered.

Bob was gagged.

Then the two men looked well to his bonds.

A long burlap sack was tied about him,

and his limps stuffed up into it to make him "fit."

Nick Carter's young detective felt pretty grawsome.

He did not mind having been outwitted by the cripple.

That was one of the occasional penalties of tackling nondescript adversaries likely to be encountered by anybody.

Bob deplored the loss of the brick—next to that, the solemn assurance that he was about to be disposed of summarily.

All he could do now was to listen—movement, voice, sight he was entirely deprived of.

He felt himself carried from the room, catching a last vindictive suggestion from the cripple to "do it quick and make no mistakes!"

There was a halt, a drop to the floor in the hall below.

Then, five minutes later, Bob was lifted into some kind of a vehicle.

He lay silent and motionless on a hard, jolting wagon-bottom, thinking furiously, conjuring up all kinds of calamity in near range.

There were some solemn stops.

Bob tried to trace out their cause.

His two executioners, it seemed, had found that he was an elephant on their hands.

They had been given a hard task to carry out—getting secretly rid of this enemy.

One was for a drop in the river—they were scared away by some policemen they saw.

Bob knew they must have crossed a ferry when they began to talk of railroad tracks.

They were in among these finally—Bob could tell it from the joltings of the wagon wheels.

The vehicle halting, one of the men went away for a minute or two.

"We can lay him across the tracks on the outbound passenger," he reported, coming back.

"And have the headlight show him in time to stop damage!"

"That isn't probable."

"Or some patrolling watchman discover him?"

"Then there's another show."

"What's that?"

"Lift him, carry him. That's it. Keep to the shadow. How's that?"

"Freight?"

"With no caboose. See?"

"I do so."

"A chain coiled up on the bumper. I know this train."

"Go ahead."

"It makes a quick run over the coal trestles to lock to another section."

"What of it?"

"Over a mile, and goes fast."

"Along the dark stretch ahead?"

"Yes. Once it starts up and that—bundle—gets a-going hacking over ties etsettery——"

"It'll be a bag of bones in half-a-mile! That'll do, because it's easy."

"Easy!"

Bob Ferret's flesh began to crawl.

For a minute or two, so atrociously inhuman was the suggestion overheard, that he almost fancied the fellows were talking to scare and torment him.

Then Bob knew differently.

His merciless executioners proceeded to business, sure and swift.

A chain with a hook ran from the bumper of the end of a freight car.

It was probably used to shunt cars on other tracks.

Bob felt himself placed flat on a cindery rise slanting to hard, silvery railroad ties.

Around his waist the chain was wound twice, and hooked.

It was so heavy that what of it rested across him made breathing difficult from sheer weight.

"Wait till they start?" queried one of his executioners.

"It's going to start right away."

"How do you know?"

"Steam up, locomotive attached."

"That's so. He's safe."

"Done for? I guess!"

"No one hereabouts to discover him."

"Back to the wagon."

Bob, in a quiver, heard receding footsteps.

"They've left!" he ruminated.

"They've driven off in the wagon!" he supplemented a minute later, as the sound of rumbling wagon wheels echoed.

"I'm ticketed for my last railroad trip, I guess!" he concluded.

It was a grawsome fix—a sense-distracting prospect.

Bob was so completely helpless, the spot probably so deserted and unfrequented, that there seemed not the slightest chance of his escaping the horrible doom impending.

Bob heard a hissing of steam way ahead at the front of the train.

One or two brief toots evidenced a call for clear switches.

Then the cars quivered, just as would a wagon in the shafts of which a horse moves restlessly.

"Going to start!" died lugubriously way down in Bob's throat.

He could not repress the violent beating of his heart, for the moment was a mighty one.

"Started!" came the conviction like a knell.

Bob slid forward slowly.

Here was the preface to a bloody chapter!

Then Bob stopped.

He heard the chain drop lax, and he felt it unbound.

He was lifted free of it, and carried.

Whoever bore him staggered under his weight—puffed, swayed, panted.

There seemed to be efforts to lift him.

Two of them failed. Then Bob traced that he was rested on the edge of some planking.

He was shoved across it.

"Who, why, and what next?" his quick thoughts flew.

Had his enemies relented in their sanguinary purpose?

No, Bob reasoned—he was certain that some stranger had rescued him.

"Ah!"

Bob's soul was in the wordless aspiration.

The freight train had started.

It did so with a jerk, and it immediately gained a speedy momentum.

He could fancy what would have been his fate had he been left chained up sixty seconds longer.

Hands were pawing over him—a pocket-knife snipped.

His bag covering was slit and pulled aside.

"In an empty freight car!" breathed Bob.

Its door was shut, the merest pinch of a lighted candle flickered in a nest of grease.

A white-faced, startled boy, about his own age sat by his side.

He looked scared, and his hands trembled as he continued to release Bob.

"You—you're alive!" he gasped, as the gag came free.

Bob gulped a satisfactory answer.

"I—I heard those men, I—I guessed!" stumbled the boy.

"To big purpose!"

"I wouldn't have believed it!"

"It's pretty true, you see?"

"They really intended to kill you—that way!" shuddered the boy.

"Just that way. Wicked men everywhere, you know—but, you see, guardian angels, too, you glorious, nick-of-time preserver!"

Bob in his hearty exuberance gave his rescuer a grip full of fervor.

"Healthy guardian angel I am!" drawled the boy, soberly.

"Hey?"

"Yes, I ain't!"

"Why! what's the matter?" inquired Bob, staring.

His companion broke out crying with vehemence of a little schoolboy.

The suddenness of the outburst amazed and perplexed Bob.

"Castaway!" blurted the boy, additionally.

"On land?"

"Don't fool!"

"I'm in dead earnest."

"Run away from home—outcast!"

"How's that?"

"Hate the farm."

"Some people can't bear it."

"Hate the city."

"That's new!"

"I do. I want to be a hunter. I was stowing in here waiting for the train to start, when I heard and saw—your fix," completed the boy with a shudder.

"Going West, eh?" queried Bob.

"Trying to."

"That will help you."

The boy's eyes sparkled as Bob Ferret emptied one pocket of all the change it held.

"That gives me heart!" said the boy.

"See here," and he drew out a soiled letter. "Dad sent me with that here to the city, to work in an office."

"Won't have it, eh?"

"I won't, and I don't! I snooked around the hot, crowded building, where this old lawyer friend of dad's offices that the letter is for. Huh! I'd stifle there. No, it's the plains for me! I won't be a lawyer, and I won't go back home. It's the wild West, and nothing else!"

The boy disdainfully cast the envelope aside.

"Give me your name," said Bob, picking it up and getting ready to pencil it.

"What for?"

"You saved my life."

"It came easy."

"It would have come harder for me to die!"

"Well, it's Doc Meers."

"I'll put that on the 'special roll!' Now then, Doc, I'm interested in you, but I hold that every boy of our age ought to have sense enough to do independently, when he gets in a quandary."

"Do you?"

"So I'll give you no advice. If I did, it would be to go squarely back home and talk things over with your father."

"No!"

"Then write him in a manly way of your intentions, and fight all the bears and wolves from here to the slope till you get sick of it."

"That's better."

The train had stopped.

"And if you don't get West, and if you ever want a friend, remember a number and a street."

"All right?"

Bob mentioned twice over, so as to impress his auditor's memory, the location of Nick Carter's detective school without giving it a name.

"Ask there for Ferret," he added.

"I will."

"I've got to leave you here. I'll stow you comfortable for the night, if you'll come with me."

"I'm going West!" affirmed the boy stubbornly.

"Good luck, then!"

"Same to you!"

Bob gave his preserver a handshake

that made him wince with its rare heartiness.

He made a fast run of progress, took the tracks to the ferry.

The first hotel he came to he hurried to its telephone.

Calling up Nick Carter's, he found that Aleck White and Larry Moore were at home.

He told them where he was, directed them to hurry to him, and waited for their arrival.

Bob was not foolhardy enough to venture a second lone visit to the den at No. 42.

The moments were tormentingly slow to him, however, as he awaited the coming of his professional assistants.

The three were started from the hotel fifteen minutes later.

A great disappointment faced Bob as he reached No. 42.

The room where his sanguinary encounter with the cripple had taken place was found open, denuded of the cripple's personal belongings, deserted and dark.

"The birds have flown!" decided Bob.

When and whither what superficial inquiry and investigation they made in the vicinity did not evolve.

"Case in a muddle, Bob?" inquired Larry, as Bob stood under the lamp post in the street below reflecting.

"Slightly."

"Better see Mr. Carter, hadn't you?"

"Not till I make a strike, if it takes ten years! No, I'll hunt up Jack and Buff. The turn my end of the case has taken makes it necessary to change our plans."

Bob took out his memorandum and consulted a cypher page.

This outlined the territory his two active conferees were covering, and would indicate how he might find them.

"It's anybody's chase now!" ruminated Bob—it's just find Gray Mapleson and the gold brick."

Jack was investigating the past doings of the murdered Albert Gordon, so he must be found and headed on more important details.

Buff, Bob knew, was endeavoring to find the big mitt men by shadowing their confidential agent, and legal adviser.

"Aaron Trull is his name," read Bob.

"I'll find Buff on his trail. Oh, hello, I say!"

Bob's head gave a kind of a quick whirl.

An immense surprise faced him—a coincidence, a stray stroke of fate, destiny, miracle.

Call it what Bob Ferret might—there it was.

Chancing to come upon the letter cast aside by the freight car stowaway, Bob reversed it.

Its address showed up as he did so.

"Marvels!" breathed Bob, aglow—"here's a corker!"

The superscription read:
"Aaron Trull, lawyer!"

CHAPTER IX.

"THE OFFICE BOY WONDER."

"Drat the fellow!"

"Who is he, Trull?"

"I call him my office boy wonder."

"Looks green as grass—sleepy, stupid."

"That's why he's wonderful—immense capacity for knowing absolutely nothing. Hey, you!"

Lawyer Trull's new office boy came forward from the rear to the front office.

He did not belie his just recorded description.

"Gawk" was written all across his tow-hair framed, freckled face.

"Gump" stared out at every fold and angle of his slipshod dress.

The office boy wonder was carrying a pail of water and a sponge.

He made his employer's eyes goggle as he banged the former against a door post, threatening to deluge the office.

Then he let the sponge slip, and his foot struck it, and he half-somersaulted, landing two feet from the lawyer's chair flat on the floor.

"Is that the way to come into a gentleman's presence!" demanded the lawyer, sternly.

"I'm from up kentry—you'll have to show me!" grinningly drawled the new office boy.

"Cleaned the window?"

"Uh-huh!"

"Say 'yes, sir.' "

"Yes'r."

"Inside, too?"

"Uh—yas'r. Ladder too long, though.

It reached outside all right, but I had to cut it in two to do 'em inside."

"What! Here, get out! Never mind the windows. Tidy up and meet callers. Oh, that natural-born idiot!" stormed the lawyer. "Takes a step-ladder, don't know it spreads open, and cuts it off because it's 'too long'!"

"He's a genius, Trull! Where did you ever get him, and why do you keep him?"

"Oh, old acquaintance in the country shipped him on my hands, and sometimes I can use even stupidity, you know!"

"You use most everything that comes along!" nodded the visitor significantly.

"That fellow is a wild show all in himself, though. I set him painting a centre iron post in the hall yesterday."

"What did he do?"

"Began at the bottom, painted up climbing, and when I found him he was trying to go to sleep aloft, not knowing how to get down without sliding all the paint off. Never mind him—to business. You come from Mapleson?"

"Direct."

"Go ahead."

"Shut the door—that boy may be listening."

"Him! Say! I'll bet you two dollars he's slipped into a chair and gone to sleep already. Drat him, if he hasn't!" declared Trull, taking a look into the next room. "Now, proceed."

"And now for my reward!" was softly whispered from the chair that held the "sleeper" in the next apartment.

"Doc Meers" had been Lawyer Trull's office boy wonder for two days.

Of course "Doc Meers" was no other than Bob Ferret, for of course Bob Ferret could never allow to escape him the glorious opportunity of getting right next to the agent and confidential adviser of the big mitt men.

With the removal from No. 42, all trace of Mapleson, his two active accomplices and the cripple had disappeared.

A twenty-four hours' scurry in the company of Jack and Buff had not enabled Bob to locate the fellows.

Then, without saying anything to his associates, Bob had started out on an independent course.

The minute that he discerned that the

letter abandoned by the freight car stow-away was a missive of introduction and recommendation to Lawyer Trull, he new that accident had given him a formidable document.

He steamed the letter flap, and read the contents.

It was simply a communication from an old farm neighbor of the lawyer, asking employment for his son, whom, judging from its tenor, Trull had never seen.

Bob risked it, anyway, and his get up was immense.

It completely deceived the lawyer, and an added series of stupid tactics threw the shrewd, crooked attorney completely off his guard.

Bob did some poking and probing into the lawyer's papers and business that was only resented as sheer stupidity.

The clear point sought, however—the finding of Gray Mapleson, the discovery of the mystery of the gold brick—had not yet shown up, even as a hint.

But now—Bob Ferret, feigning sleep in his chair in the outer office, listened for all he was worth.

The lawyer's companion in the front room was named Dayton, Bob found out.

He and a friend named Pearson were members of the "con bunch," and wanted to get things "squared up."

From what Bob could judge, Dayton had just come from the hiding-place of Mapleson and the others.

"Why didn't you bring the gold brick along?" demanded Trull.

"Suspicious."

"Who?"

"Mapleson."

"Send it to me, and I'd fix out the whole business."

"He knows that, but he won't trust any of us."

"Why not?"

"Well, he won't, that's all. He says for you to come after it yourself."

The lawyer laughed derisively.

"Think I've got any time to waste trapseing over the country, does he?"

"He insists on it."

"Let him bring it himself."

"Him! Do you now what's out after him?"

"I do."

"Nick Carter."

"Exactly, and that Gordon break was a bad one."

"He couldn't get back the brick without shooting."

"How did Gordon come to get it, anyway?"

"Well, Mapleson roped him in."

"Yes?"

"Got him to put three thousand dollars in a bunch of brass."

"Did, eh?"

"And, bless me! in the hocus-pocus of changing the bricks, if they didn't give the sucker the one containing—"

"I understand," nodded Trull, significantly.

"It took murder to get it back. Gordon wouldn't give it up till he was paid back the swindled money. No, Mapleson's scared to death. The Carter pack is after him in full scent. He wants to leave for new fields, all hands of us with him. You won't come for the brick?"

"Not I. I don't want to scorch my fingers with his leery chestnuts."

"But you'll transact the rest of the affair after the brick is in your hands?"

"That's business, so, of course."

"I don't see, though—"

"About my getting it?"

"Yes."

"I'll fix that."

"How?"

Bob was "snoring" as the attorney stepped into that rear room.

"Here, you!" he hailed.

"Huh?"

Bob straightened up sleepily.

"I want you."

"Yas'r."

"Come into my private office. Get your eyes open. Sit down."

"Which—which first, sir?"

"Oh, you're a jewel! See here, I'm going to send you with this gentleman," spoke Trull, indicating his visitor.

"How de do?" nodded Bob. "What for, though?"

"I'm to give you a letter."

"Yas'r."

"This gentleman and a friend will lead you to a friend of mine."

"Can't I find him alone?"

"Do you think you're capable of finding anything alone!"

"Ha! ha! Just what dad says. That's a joke, hain't et!"

"This business isn't, and you're to get a package for me from the man this gentleman will take you to."

"What's in it?"

"Blow me—well, his very stupidity helps us. No danger of his getting onto anything and blowing the gaff," murmured Trull, aside to his visitor. "It's quite a long journey," he resumed aloud.

"Far as Filadelphy, now?"

"Never mind. You do just as this gentleman says."

"Yas'r."

"Be ready when he returns with his friend, to go with him."

"Are we to walk or go afoot?"

"Retire. Now—I'll give him an order. That simplifies the matter. How soon can you reach Mapleson?"

"It isn't far, but we go cautiously, to be sure we're not followed," responded Dayton.

"That's right."

"And as we're short of funds, my partner and I may take an odd trick or two on the way down."

"Don't complicate things."

"Oh! we've our goose ready waiting to be plucked."

"Good!" soliloquized Bob Ferret, listening actively in the adjoining apartment. "I'm going to see some variety in my prospective journey, it appears."

The lawyer and his visitor left the office.

Bob sat down to write a quick note to Nick Carter.

He felt that he now had everything in his own hands, but he wanted to make no mistakes.

He slipped the half-written epistle into his pocket as there was a tap at the hall door.

"Come in—here's sport!"

Bob said the last two words under his breath.

His quick glance had looked shrewdly under the surface of the newcomer.

This latter was a dandified, mustachioed young fellow, quite exquisite in appearance, very foreign, in accent.

"Hum!" muttered Bob with a chuckle, and then aloud, "What can I do for you, sir?"

"I am not sure—I am professaire!" spoke the visitor loftily.

"All right!"

"I wish to see ze—vat you call him? Ze banister——"

"They're outside."

"No, no—ze barrister."

"Oh, Mr. Trull?"

"Zat is so."

"What about?"

"I vish his advices, his comments, his legal opinions, on a case."

"Say, come off!"

"Sare!"

"You've got no case!"

"Satisfaction!"

"Tip the perch, Buff—this is my side of the fence!"

"Bob!"

"That's who."

Disgruntled Buff Hutchinson nearly fell to a chair staring at disguised Bob Ferret.

"You knew me!" mourned Buff.

"In one of Nick Carter's disguises I once wore myself? Well, I should think!"

"That's so!"

"Otherwise, you're immaculate, Buff, but—no need."

"Not if you're here!"

"I'm watching every point."

"I can guess that."

"And the focus has come."

"The climax."

"Capital!"

"Listen."

In a hurry—for Lawyer Trull might return at any moment—Bob recited the situation exactly as it was.

He directed Buff to get to Jack at once.

"He's waiting outside," explained the pretended Frenchman.

"Very well, let him follow me when I leave here with the two con men."

"I see."

"You watch the office here."

"The dull end, as usual!"

"You don't know that. Everything may miss that I plan, while here that mysterious gold brick must finally come. Here's a key to the office. Watch close, new points may develop here most important. Quick! Trull is coming back."

"Ah, sare! I thank you, sare—the office I require is on the next floor, sare!"

With a flourish Buff sailed safely out of the office.

Two men accompanied the lawyer—the one he had left with him, Dayton, and his partner, Parsons, Bob guessed.

Trull wrote a note, and told Bob to stow it safely away.

"Now, then, you are to go with these two gentlemen as I directed," said Trull.

"Yas'r."

Bob left the office of which he was the "stimulating wonder" braced up mightily under a sleepy, freckled surface.

The brick was his—its mystery, its possessor, the assassin of the relative of a schoolboy comrade, if he worked things cute.

He blinked a quick recognition as he passed a figure studying a sign at the bottom of the stairs.

It was Jack Burton, and Bob knew that he would have company at a distance on his present mysterious journey.

Farther down the street he passed "the professaire" airily petting his black, wax-ended mustache and twirling his dainty cane.

Buff cast a sidelong covetous glance after the two comrades he considered more fortunate than himself.

They were going into direct action—he had nothing but dull, routine shadowing to do.

Buff was conscientious, however, and always obeyed orders.

He ranged the office building looking for imaginary attorneys and inquiring of real estate agents for impossible property.

About five o'clock in the afternoon he glided to the shadow of a side corridor.

Buff had observed two persons at the door of Lawyer Trull's office.

The elder was a farmer-looking man.

He held close clutch upon the arm of a sullen-faced boy.

He was hammering at the office door, which seemed to be locked.

Suddenly it opened.

Lawyer Trull put out a flushed face.

"What's all this hullabaloo?" he demanded, fiercely.

"Hello, Trull! don't you know your old farm neighbor?"

"Why surely!" exclaimed the other, changing his tone—"it's Meers."

"That's who."

"What!" voiced Buff Hutchinson, and stood aghast.

In a flash, remembering what his professional comrade had just told him, Buff traced a complication, a knock-out for all Bob Ferret's shrewd plans.

"Come down to see me about your son, Doc, in my office?" smiled Trull. "Come in."

"No, I didn't."

"Eh?"

"Come to put him in jail! He ran away—the villain! I caught him. He wouldn't be no lawyer. I'm going to make a convict of him, the young reprobate!"

Lawyer Trull's face looked puzzled.

Buff Hutchinson began to get alarmed.

"See here," spoke the lawyer, "what are you talking about, when your son has been two days already in my employ?"

"What!" yelled the farmer.

"Hasn't he?"

"No, he hasn't!"

"He has. I got your letter of introduction, of recommendation."

"I wrote one, but—"

"I hired him on your say so."

"Trull, be ye crazy?"

"Certainly not!"

"Certainly, you are!"

"Why?"

"Because here is my son," and the man nodded to the shrinking boy he held firmly by the arm.

"That!"

"Is my son."

"Incredible!"

"Yes, sirree!"

"Then—"

Lawyer Trull recoiled, struck by a sudden suspicion regarding the office boy wonder he had just entrusted with a vital mission, as if struck by a hammer.

"Fooled!" he gasped.

"Guess you be!" nodded the farmer.

"Duped!"

"Mebbe sure!"

"Your boy—"

"This is him, and this is the nighest step he ever was to your orfis!"

Buff Hutchinson's lips drew to a dismayed pucker.

"Whew!" he uttered forcibly. "Bob Ferret's in a wild fix, now!"

CHAPTER X.

RED OR BLUE?

"Keep your mouth shut now, youngster!"

"Yas'r."

"And watch out. Maybe you may learn some day yourself to be a real bright flim-flammer."

"But where's the poker?"

"Ha, ha! ho, ho! oh, Pearson! hold me! This boy will make me bust!"

"What you grinning at? Didn't you say you expected a fellow here who was to play poker with you?"

"Certainly, sonny!"

"Then where's the poker to do it?"

"You watch and you'll find out."

"Yas'r."

Thus the office boy wonder, true to his reputation.

Bob Ferret had played the two men who were convoying him from New York city the rankest he knew how, all along the line.

They had left the metropolis guardedly and deviously, but Bob doubted if Jack Burton had missed the trail.

They were now, the second evening, at a little town twenty miles north of Riverdale.

They had arrived there early in the afternoon.

From the actions of Dayton and Pearson Bob was satisfied that they were near the hiding-place of Mapleson and his cohorts.

"Just waiting for a few more suckers and night, to make a slip in the dark to the place where I'm going to get that gold brick!" hopeful Bob made himself believe.

The afternoon had been a varied and enlightening one.

A rural convention was in progress, and Dayton and Pearson had taken several of those "tricks" they had spoken of to Lawyer Trull.

Bob voted them clever, dangerous men in their line.

Three-card monte never had more skilled exponents, and the short change racket they played at two stores simply dazzled Bob and never awoke the suspicion of the victims.

They had an engagement to meet a rural "tin-horn sport" that evening.

He was to be roped in playing cards with them, and they were now preparing for his reception, which was nearly due.

While Bob bungled over what "poker" was, he watched every move the fellows made.

They had several packs of cards.

All of them had blue or red spots for the card marks.

"Here, try it on the boy," spoke Dayton, taking up their trick pack, which they kept in a hat box containing a sponge dampened with some liquid they had poured from a bottle.

"Can't play real keerds!" drawled Bob.

"Don't want you to. You know the spots?"

"Yas'r."

"Very well. Now, we're playing."

"Yas'r."

"I deal you five cards."

"I've got 'em."

"Look at them."

"I'm a-looking."

"What are they?"

"King, queen, jack, ten and nine spot of hearts."

"Sure?"

"Hain't a heart red?"

"Every time!"

"And don't I know a heart?"

"That is what is called a royal flush," explained the gambler.

"Is it, now?"

"A combination not beat once in a million times."

"My! hain't I lucky to get it?"

"So, if you got such a hand you'd be safe to bet all you had."

"I should think so!"

"Sure you've got what you said?"

"Didn't I see?"

"Look again."

"Hopping hornets!"

"What's the matter?"

"Tain't all red!"

"Ah?" smiled Dayton significantly.

"The king of hearts ain't nary king of hearts at all!"

"Possible?"

"It's the king of spades!"

"Oho! So, you see, if you had bet, you'd have lost big!"

"I do see, but I'd swear them was all hearts onc!"

The two men winked and laughed.

They chuckled quite as much over Bob's feigned stupefaction as over their cleverness in producing this marvelous transformation.

"I see how it is, and it's a brand new one to me," mused Bob. "They use chemically prepared cards. Between the time the fellow sees his hands, lays it down, makes his bet, takes up his hand again, red changes to blue, the heart to a spade, and there you are! Well, I'll nip this scheme, for variety."

Bob did. He managed in the course of the next ten minutes to get possession of a real royal flush from a discarded pack of cards.

Ten minutes later the prospective victim entered.

He was the "smart Aleck" of the village, and he boastfully flipped his cards, shuffled, and kept watch on his rivals like a real city-bird professional.

They let him win for some time. Then the big hand was dealt him.

Bob was right at the fellow's elbow.

His breath nearly taken away by his extraordinary luck, the village sport lay down his hand trembling.

"One hundred!" he tried to say calmly.

"I raise you two," announced Dayton, feeling that the fish had bit, and they could land him for his pile.

Bob decided that it would not harm his plans reducing his two escorts to a condition of poverty.

He let them bet, and he did something else—executed a clever card transposition under the victim's elbow clever and quick as a stage magician.

"Five hundred dollars!"

"Show up!"

"A royal flush!" triumphantly proclaimed the village fellow, sweeping in his winnings.

"Hold on! it isn't——"

"Isn't? look!"

"One's a—perdition!"

The office boy wonder was conveniently fast asleep as the triumphant victim departed with his gains. Dayton began to swear and Parsons to glare.

Bob's very stupidity saved their thinking of him in the matter.

"Diamond cut diamond!" growled Dayton. "The fellow was onto our game and did us!"

They were very surly-natured over their mishap.

In about an hour they gruffly bade Bob follow them.

"For Mapleson, for the gold brick!" secretly gloated Bob.

He was escorted about a mile from the town.

Just past a crossroads tavern the men started down a path, when a sharp challenge halted.

"Who's that?"

"Dayton—Pearsons."

"Some one with you?"

"From Trull."

"Dayton come forward, alone."

Bob kept his ears wide open, but could only catch the echo of vague, hurried, excited whisperings.

Then Dayton returned.

Bob fancied his manner was a trifle constrained, as he said sharply:

"Come on, now!"

Bob was led forward till they reached an old abandoned house.

He was shown promptly into a room where a man sat, alone.

It was Gray Mapleson. Bob knew the big mitt man the minute he set his eyes on him.

There was something in his look Bob did not like, could not fathom.

"You're the messenger Trull sent?" spoke Mapleson.

"Yas'r."

"With a note?"

"Here 'tis."

Mapleson read it, went into another room, came back with a small, oblong parcel.

Bob's eyes must have glowed—he had got what he so coveted, the gold brick.

Bob's fingers tingled as they closed over the precious package.

"Get that right back to Trull," ordered Mapleson.

"Yas'r."

"Don't stop at a place, cross over to the railroad, straight."

"Yas'r."

Bob got to the path—he started down it alone.

"It's the best way—the only way to fix him sure!"

These words Bob certainly heard as he left the house.

What "way"?—but he cared not. The only "way" he was thinking of now was the one leading to a safe distance where he could investigate his precious possession.

Bob got out on the road.

"Stop!"

Was some one calling him?

Bob turned, saw a form in pursuit, ran his fastest.

Who was pursuing him, for pursued he was?

Twice the order was breathlessly shouted, but Bob did not heed or venture a parley.

Some of the crowd about Mapleson might meditate despoiling him of the brick.

Some outsider might know of it and be laying for it.

Bob was distancing his pursuer, for he ran fast, but he wanted to get out of his range of vision as well.

As he neared the cross roads tavern Bob put across its yard.

He came to where a high fence met a low fence.

In the former was a stout door.

Bob turned its knob. An open space showed, and he let the door flop shut and started across it.

"I'm in it!"

Bob stood still, panting and staring.

He was in a prison space, sure.

Then he saw what it was—a sort of corral for some strong animal or animals.

"A steer!" he soliloquized, peering keenly as a great form arose in one corner.

Could he escape?—up those smooth hard plank walls, not in a hurry.

"Hey!"

Bob looked up.

A platform, it seemed, ran up at the side of the pen that he had not seen before.

A form was on it—that of the person who had pursued.

"Throw it!" was gasped down.

"Eh?"

"It's me!"

"Buff!"

"Yes."

"What are you doing here?"

"Never mind," hurried on Buff—"the box! the parcel!"

"Well?"

"Throw it!"

"I guess not! the gold brick."

"It's not the gold brick!"

"What—"

"Take care!"

Bob gave a vivid spring.

With a terrific bellow the monster in the corner started for him.

He dodged and then stumbled, for some one struck him, landing from above.

It was Buff.

He grabbed at the gold brick, tore it from Bob's grasp, gave it a fearful fling.

"I'll explain!" he hurried.

"You'd better!"

"The steer!"

"It's coming!"

"Can't we climb up? My mask lantern! Here it is. No matches! Quick, Bob! got one?"

"No, yes, one only. Pshaw! dropped it. Dodge!"

The steer made a second rush.

Bob flapped off his coat.

Toreador-fashion, he tried to engage the furious animal till Buff found a match.

Buff found none, and announced the fact.

"Wait, though!" he added. "I've got something just as good, I forgot."

Buff brought a small vial from his pocket.

"Drop! run! it's coming for you!" shouted Bob just then.

The steer made a side twist of its ponderous body and a bolt.

Buff could not get aside quickly.

He went flat, put up one hand, and it ran right into the animal's mouth.

To his friend's rescue Bob sprang in a flash.

"Not hurt!" panted Buff, as he scurried aside on hand and knee.

"The steer!"

Bob Ferret stared, marveled.

The steer gave a frightful, fearful bellow.

It reared mightily, and fell with a force that shook the earth.

Then Bob Ferret saw a curious thing. The steer was spitting fire!

CHAPTER XI.

ROXY'S CAPTURE.

"What?"

Bob Ferret fairly hurled the word at Buff.

His companion's hand had gone into the mad steer's mouth, and he must be responsible for the extraordinary fireworks display now so strangely in progress.

"The new cigar-lighter," explained Buff.

"You mean the stuff that burns when dipped in water?"

"Yes, got a bottle from a fakir to-day."

"Look out—the animal is simply crazy!"

Any person who has seen the curious chemical used for lighting cigars on a windy day, and which ignites into molten lava only when moisture is applied, may imagine the appearance and frenzy of the steer.

Its semblance was simply terrific.

Its dripping jaws were spitting spurts of hissing fire.

Every time it breathed, a flaming hail spattered far and wide.

The moisture in its mouth igniting new pieces of the chemical, new spurts kept pouring forth.

Bob kept his coat fluttering.

"There's no way out," cried Buff, vainly endeavoring to find one.

"The animal will tire out."

"But we must get out before—"

The steer began to rear. It made a final plunge upward.

Its agony drove it blindly headlong against one end of the enclosure.

Down crashed the same.

"Out through it, quick!" ordered Buff, seizing his companion's arm and hurrying him.

"Hold on!"

"No!"

"The gold brick!" remonstrated Bob.

"There is none."

"That parcel, then—"

"You were fooled."

"You don't mean it!"

"You were doomed, if—run! Didn't I tell you!"

There was a flare, a dull explosion.

"What?" again projected Bob.

"Can't you guess—the gold brick!"

"It's blown up!"

"Full of powder—set fuse."

"Intended for me?"

"No one else."

"How did you know?"

"Come this way, and I'll tell you."

"Why this way?"

"Because it leads back to the den of those fellows, because Jack is there."

"Sure?"

"Why, Buff!"

"And Aleck."

"Say! How did you locate it?"

"And—Roxy!"

"You get me!" confessed the astonished Bob.

"Then let me explain."

Buff did so as they hurried on.

The preface to his story was the arrival of the real Doc Meers at Lawyer Trull's office.

In an instant the knavish barrister had guessed the truth.

His office boy wonder was of course a spy, a detective.

Nick Carter was on the case—the fraudulent farmer boy must be one of his famous pupils.

Immediately the lawyer sent for a man in with the big mitt crowd.

He was dispatched with the intelligence of the imposition intended to warn Mapleson.

By following him, Buff had got to this location that morning.

Posing as a road mender, he had pretty well read the situation of affairs.

He had sent word to Nick Carter by telegraph—then he had watched out for Bob's arrival.

Aleck and Larry, having had a hand in one portion of the case, wanted a chance to see its windup.

They had come on, stopping at Riverdale.

Accidentally happening across Roxy—who was taking music lessons at the seminary there—the plucky little lady had insisted she was getting rusty as to detective service, and had accompanied them at once.

Jack had appeared just after Bob's arrival.

While he and the three others surrounded the place, Buff was deputized to stop Bob as he came out.

His doing so had saved Nick Carter's

youngest and brightest novice from going up in a blaze of powder.

The murderous Mapleson had let Bob depart, believing the fuse-package to be a sure way of getting rid of him.

"And where are the contents of the gold brick?" inquired Bob, anxiously.

"Taken out."

"By Mapleson?"

"Yes."

"He has them?"

"Fast and secure—he's got rattled, and won't wait for the lawyer to act."

"What are they?"

"Stolen bonds belonging to a Newark bank."

"Amount?"

"I don't know, but something big. They are not negotiable for six months yet, but unless the bank gets them back at once it will have to suspend."

"And Mapleson got them—?"

"Through a bank sneak."

"And secured them in the brick?"

"You have it, and Gordon got them by mistake."

"And we must get them now!"

"That's what we're here for. Come on!"

"Nothing has happened," spoke Bob, as they darted down the path where Buff had tried to hail him. "It's too quiet."

"Everything has happened!" interrupted a startling voice.

"Jack!" challenged Bob.

"Yes."

"What of the others?"

"We've cornered the crowd."

"You don't mean—"

"Five of them."

"Including Mapleson?"

"Sorry to say, no."

"He didn't get away!"

"He did get away."

"Then mass for instant chase!" ordered Bob excitedly. "Don't you see that the rest are nothing—he, the murderer, and those bonds, everything!"

"Roxy's, after him."

"A girl—alone!"

"No, with her dog."

"A magnificent St. Bernard," explained Buff. "A new pet she would bring with her."

"Hear that!"

The young detective trio turned their faces all in the same direction at once.

The sharp bay of a dog broke the stillness.

"That's Roxy," affirmed Jack.

"You mean her dog," corrected Buff.

"It's the same thing in this case," joined in Buff.

"You have the five fellows in the old building secured?" queried Bob, as they ran on.

"Aleck and Larry are guarding them, yes," answered Jack.

"There's our signal!" interrupted Buff.

"Roxy!"

Nick Carter's girl detective could whistle like a lark.

Her clear signal call met an eager chorus of replies.

The next minute she came flitting toward them.

"Bob safe?" she fluttered.

"Here, Roxy!" hailed Bob, promptly.

"And the crowd of schemers?"

"Five under guard."

"And one makes six!"

"You got Mapleson!" cried Bob.

"I tried to."

"Where is he?"

"Sir Richard is guarding him."

"Guarding him?" spoke Bob, with considerable anxiety manifested in his tones.

"Well, tied to him, if that suits you better. Don't worry, Bob!" smiled the little lady confidently, "nobody will ever get away from Sir Richard once I put him in his charge!"

"He has some papers, Roxy—?" began Bob.

"Had them, you mean?"

"Do you ever miss anything, Roxy?"

"I didn't miss those—there's what the gold brick held, Bob."

Roxy led the way back to where a large tree stood in an open space.

There was a growl as the quartette broke cover.

It changed to a pronounced hail of satisfaction as Roxy spoke.

Jack had his mask lantern in his coat, lighted.

He produced it, playing its rays over the novel scene.

Tied to the tree by the arms was Mapleson.

Tied to Mapleson by a second cord was the most magnificent canine specimen Bob had ever seen.

"You've done well, Roxy!" commended Bob warmly.

"You mean Sir Richard has—he made one leap for that fellow, as I run him down."

"The running down was the main part of it."

"Well, there he is."

"Last scene in the case, I guess!" remarked Buff.

"Except one!" observed Bob Ferret, significantly.

Mapleson changed his rageful glare to a shudder.

The shadow of the gallows was over him, and he felt its drear chill already.

A telegram to Nick Carter set in motion the local law machinery.

Bob, Buff, Jack and Roxy dropped out of the case as Aleck and Larry delivered their prisoners into the keeping of the town jailer.

Two pleasant duties were deputized to Bob's part, however, before he rejoined his comrades at Riverdale Academy.

One was a visit of explanation and restitution to the Newark Bank.

It left behind it hope and energy where ruin had threatened.

Bob, closeted with his friends, Buff and Jack, in his cozy academy room the following evening, looked and felt his satisfaction entire over the outcome of the gold brick case.

"Had hard work getting the bank officials to let me go without making newspaper heroes of all hands," said Bob.

"Which wouldn't do at all!" demurred Buff.

"Not while we're students at Riverdale Academy," added Jack.

"No, I want to remain here long enough at least to see the murdered man's nephew get some brightness out of the dreary situation," spoke Bob.

"Young Gordon?" murmured Jack.

"Exactly."

"What about him?"

"The three thousand dollars the big mitt men got from his murdered uncle was all the poor old fellow had."

"And that was swallowed up by those confidence corimorants, I suppose?"

"Of course," assented Bob. "I told the bank of that."

"Did you?"

"They were only too willing to check out liberally for Nick Carter's detective school."

"Which you wouldn't have?"

"I told them we were working for glory, not money."

"That's right!"

"But that if they wanted to do a real, square thing, to remember the living sufferer in the affair."

"Will they do it?"

"They've done it."

"How?"

"A check is on its way now that will enable young Gordon to complete his education at Riverdale Academy," replied Bob Ferret.

[THE END.]

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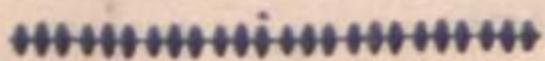
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